

### Project Mahathir: 'Extraordinary' Population Growth in Sabah

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## Im Fokus

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### ***Project Mahathir: 'Extraordinary' Population Growth in Sabah***

Sina Frank

#### **Abstract**

The Malaysian state of Sabah faced an “extraordinary” population growth during the last decades. Illegal immigrants are said to have been issued Malaysian Identity Cards based on false statutory declarations. The so-called “Project Mahathir” changed Sabah’s ethnic make-up as well as the participation in elections. Politicians are said to have made use of “Phantom voters” in order to decide Sabah elections. Finally, with the help of a petition Sabah-based NGO’s demand an investigation into the case: Those who are responsible for the massive influx of illegal immigrants may soon be charged.

*Key words: Project Mahathir, Sabah, illegal immigrants, population growth*

#### **Introduction**

Although Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia, it has played an insignificant role in Malaysian politics until the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) discovered its potential. When Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over the premiership in 1981, Sabah’s politics were considered as underdeveloped (Brown 2004: 231) – but from the 1990s on, the Malay party UMNO transformed Sabah into a state that actively participates in Malaysian politics.

During the last decades, Sabah saw an “extraordinary” population growth. A large number of illegal immigrants crossed the Sabahan borders which became apparent as “phantom voters” in Sabah state elections (Loh 2005: 102). Sabahan ethnic groups such as Kadazandusuns and Muruts feel threatened by the growing Muslim community in the state: The UMNO membership has jumped to about half a million, allowing UMNO to increase its influence in the state. Who is to blame for the increasing number of “phantom voters” in the state? Leaders of Sabah-based NGOs recently stirred up the debate on the sudden demographic

change by accusing former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad of having supported the legalisation of illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries. They started a signature campaign to urge the King of Malaysia to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) investigating the circumstances that led to this demographic change. The RCI could finally clarify the role of governmental authorities accused to have deliberately given Malaysian ICs to half a million illegal immigrants in an operation called “Project Mahathir”.

## The History of Illegal Immigration to Sabah

Regional migration flows within Southeast Asia are not a phenomenon restricted to current times. Social and cultural connections between Sabah, the Southern parts of the Philippines and the Indonesian province of Kalimantan have existed for centuries. The first trade relations, the bartering of goods, linked up the region as early as the ninth century.

The long tradition of border crossing from the Philippine Sulu Archipelago to Sabah originates in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. This first wave of migration was linked to the Spanish colonialists who began pushing southwards toward the island provinces Sulu and Tawi-Tawi from Manila, the centre of Spanish power. The struggle for dominance between different ethnic groups and the Spanish in the Southern Philippine region led to increased immigration of Philippine ethnic groups such as Suluks and Bajaus to Sabah.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, Sabah, formerly known as British North Borneo, was ruled by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC). In 1942, the Japanese occupied the state which turned into a British crown colony after the Second World War. Finally, in 1963 Sabah obtained self-government from the British and entered the newly created Malaysian Federation. Despite that, the Philippines made claims to the territory of Sabah. The arrival of the first illegal immigrants in Sabah in the 1960s was said to be associated with the then Philippine president Ferdinand E. Marcos and his country’s claim to the Northern Borneo region (*Malaysiakini*, 20.3.06). At the same time, a Suluk from the Southern Philippines, Mustapha Datu Harun, held the position of Chief Minister of Sabah. He was believed to have encouraged many Suluks to move to Northern Borneo during his term of office 1967-1976. Mustapha established a strong Muslim community which was represented by the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO).

Of course, the significant migration flows from the Sulu Archipelago to Sabah cannot be explained solely by individual intentions of politicians trying to achieve their political and personal aims: The armed separatist rebellion in the Muslim-predominated Mindanao region of the Philippines caused the second wave of immigration to Sabah in the 1970s. The conflict between the Philippine Army, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), “a more militant rebel group which split from the MNLF in 1977” (*BBC News*, 10.2.05), caused the emigration of thousands of Suluk and Bajau. During 1970-1977, the Malaysian Immigration Department issued temporary passes, known as IMM 13 documents, to 57,000 Filipinos who fled the war-torn Southern provinces. The majority of these political refugees settled in coastal towns such as Sandakan or Tawau along the East Coast of Sabah. The temporary migrants became permanent residents and the state’s population increased by thirty percent within a decade: from 653,000 in 1970 to 955,712 in 1980 (*Malaysiakini*, 10.2.06).

In 1978, the Philippines dropped their claim to Sabah. Still, the fear that Northern Borneo could be taken out of Malaysia or that Sabah could lose its sovereignty as a state within a federation remains as the current discussion about a “reverse takeover” (*Malaysiakini*, 22.6.06) by illegal immigrants reveals.

### **Project Mahathir: A “Reverse Takeover”?**

According to official statistics, the state’s population increased from 653,000 in 1970 to 2.6 million in 2000. This extraordinary growth rate during the last three decades amounts to nearly 300 percent and can only be explained by a massive influx of immigrants. The current state’s total population is even estimated to be in the range of about 3.2 and 3.3 million inhabitants. It is an open secret that Sabah’s demography has been changed by special exercises codenamed “Project 1” and “Project 2” that enabled undocumented immigrants to legalise their status.

Under the leadership of Patrick Sindu, the president of the Consumer Association of Sabah and Labuan Federal Territory (Cash), Sabah-based NGOs have recently claimed that there are at least 1.5 million illegal immigrants in the state – half of them are said to have been issued genuine Malaysian Identity Cards. Headlines in the daily press such as “Politician fears ‘reverse takeover’ of Sabah” (*Malaysiakini*, 22.6.06), “Warning: Illegals can take over Sabah” (*Malaysiakini*, 1.8.06) or “Illegals problem in Sabah like ‘cancer’” (*Malaysiakini*, 3.8.06) reflect the current outcry against the worrying population explosion. Have Sabahans

already lost control over their own territory? Who is to blame for a development that turned natives into a minority in Sabah?

The government agency responsible for issuing Malaysian identification, the National Registration Department (NRD), is accused to have deliberately issued Malaysian ICs to foreigners based on falsified *surat akuan* (statutory declarations). The point in question is the general practice of distributing Malaysian ICs based on statutory declarations: For the majority of the immigrants coming from the neighbouring countries Indonesia and the Philippines it is easy to pretend being Malaysian since it is hard to distinguish between the various Muslim ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. Different indigenous groups such as Suluks, Illanun and Binadan – summarized by the collective term ‘Bajau’ – have settled throughout the region. Malaysian Bajaus and Bugis closely resemble Filipino Bajaus and Indonesian Bugis in terms of spoken language and physical appearance. Therefore the acceptance of statutory declarations for the registration of citizens offers illegal immigrants an opportunity to easily obtain ICs. The fact that the validity of the *surat akuan* is difficult to check might have enabled the NRD to deliberately issue a large number of Malaysian ICs to irregular citizens without being controlled sufficiently.

According to Sabah-based NGOs, the immigration of undocumented citizens had already been promoted under the rule of Chief Ministers Mustapha Harun (USNO, 1967-1975) and Harris Salleh (Berjaya, 1976-1985). During the Mindanao conflict, “Project 1” – that is the governmental support secretly given to Philippine immigrants in Sabah – turned into an attractive pull factor. However, in comparison to the number of migrants who crossed the Sabahan borders in the post-1978 period the number of the political refugees coming from the Mindanao region is small (Sadiq 2005: 106).

The reason why Sabah is targeted by many immigrants cannot be reduced to its geographical extent and position. Although the state of Sabah is close to Mindanao and shares cultural ties with the Southern Philippine region the immigrants’ intention to cross the Sabahan borders has presumably been mainly promoted by the second secret governmental operation of “Project 2”, also referred to as Project Mahathir or Project IC. According to non-Muslim Sabahans, Project Mahathir has noticeably influenced the demography of Sabah: More than half a million illegal immigrants are said to have been issued genuine ICs that allowed them to enjoy all the privileges of citizenship, including the right to vote. The legalisation of illegal

immigrants can be seen as a cumulative process that encouraged an increasing number of Filipinos and Indonesians to emigrate.

The unregulated influx of foreigners in the nineties drastically changed Sabah's ethnic composition. Non-Muslim natives allege that Project Mahathir is in fact the codename for a secret political strategy which was supposed to lead to a demographic change. Due to the fact that predominantly Muslim Suluks from the Southern Philippines and Muslim Bugis from Indonesia immigrated to the state of Sabah the local indigenous community of the Kadazandusuns and other indigenous groups lost influence. The preponderance of Filipinos is particularly appearing in towns such as Kinabatangan or Kunak where the native population is outnumbered one to two.

Through the lack of organisation of citizenship immigrants do not necessarily depend on the help of politicians issuing ICs. Citizenship, far from being the most protected form of membership, is weakly institutionalized in Sabah: Inexistent birth certificates and passports among the native population created an unstructured citizen card mess which enables illegal immigrants to live and work without Identity Cards. Due to the fact that the precise number of illegal immigrants is not recordable, estimations of illegal residents fluctuate: While the Philippine embassy in Malaysia has given the figure of 500,000 Filipinos living in Sabah, the Indonesian consul general for Sabah and Sarawak has estimated 250,000 illegal Indonesian immigrants reside in the state. The central Malaysian government, however, denies the dimensions of the massive influx of immigrants. By admitting only 100,000 illegal immigrants in Sabah, Malaysia's government gives the impression of deliberately covering up the truth. But why should a government support the legalisation of illegal immigrants?

The latest findings concerning the electoral role of illegal immigrants are published in a journal article by Kamal Sadiq (Sadiq 2005). The author explains that illegal immigrants such as Bangladeshis in India or Filipinos in Sabah are often used as voters and therefore play an important part in elections. The active political participation of illegal immigrants is planned and calculated by those who helped them accessing citizenship. The "new citizens" are expected to vote for their benefactors – in Sabah assumingly politicians of the ruling Malay party UMNO. Kamal Sadiq describes motives that could have driven local Malay authorities to encourage illegal immigration into Sabah. The author states that legalising illegal immigrants even evolved into a "preferred strategy of the dominant Malay parties" (Sadiq 2005: 116) which have seen the change in the state's ethnic make-up in

its favour. An increasing Muslim community can ensure political success of the Muslim-led UMNO and support the goals of the Malaysian central government.

Although the Project Mahathir case has officially not yet been investigated, the non-Muslim Sabahans have no doubts about governmental involvement of legalising Muslim immigrants from neighbouring states. According to PBS supreme council member Dr Chong Eng Leong, a High Court case in Tawau in 1995 revealed that senior UMNO members helped foreigners to become citizens of Sabah. In addition, he made headlines by urging the Election Commission (EC) to clean up the electoral rolls which are assumed to have been padded with half of Project Mahathir's IC holders especially in the years 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001 (*Malaysiakini*, 20.6.06). Former senator Dr Chong is convinced that the central government gained political control over Sabah through irregular immigrants registered as voters. For instance, many Filipinos are believed to be issued ICs and told to register as voters instead of being deported and sent home upon their release from the detention center. The growing Muslim community of Sabah cast their votes for the Muslim-led UMNO, which dominates the National Front coalition (Barisan Nasional, BN). The Barisan Nasional coalition traditionally holds State and Federal Government posts in Malaysia. The BN has gained a two third majority in every Malaysian National Parliament since Independence in 1957 – except for the 1969 election (Ufen 2005: 50).

The electoral influence of illegal immigrants in Sabah became apparent in the certified 1999 electoral rolls. They included 150,000 local voters born in the period between 1952 and 1960. However, Sabah Statistics Department data stands in sharp contrast to that number: Between 1952 and 1960, the Sabah-born population increased by only 120,000 (*Malaysiakini*, 20.6.06). Considering the fact that usually only eighty percent of a generation registers as voters shows that the population of Sabah is indeed expanding extraordinarily. Instead of 100,000, there were 150,000 voters born in this time period who participated in the Sabah election. One third of the voters is assumed to be formed by foreigners. The result of the election reflected the ethnic composition: Dr Mahathir Mohamad (UMNO) turned out as winner. The vote closely followed ethnic lines with predominantly Muslim areas voting for the Barisan Nasional (BN) and the ethnic Kadazandusun population, at that time already a minority in Sabah, voting for the Christian-led PBS which did not join the BN at that time.

Although the natives have recognized the considerable dominance of Filipino immigrants as voters, the reasons behind Project Mahathir have not yet been

explored. Recently, former senator Dr Chong Eng Leong has livened up the debate on Project Mahathir by openly accusing former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad of active involvement in the affair for political and economic reasons. Rumours about Project Mahathir have reflected badly on the image of Malaysia's political system, but the actions of single mavericks like Dr Chong or Patrick Sindu have not yet been successful to call to account those who are to blame for the problem referring to the extra people with Identity Cards.

The recent shift in opinion of the Yayasan Islam Sabah (YIS), a religious foundation led by former Chief Minister Harris Salleh, seems to mark a momentous change in the debate on Project Mahathir. By the end of February 2006 the YIS still asked the federal authorities to acknowledge all *surat akuan* used for the issuance of ICs (*Malaysiakini*, 24.2.06). The foundation traditionally denied conflicts rooted in the massive influx of immigrants and defended the validity of statutory declarations. Yet, in the end of June 2006, the YIS finally backed up the call by the Consumer Association of Sabah and Labuan Federal Territory (Cash) that police should investigate the circumstances leading to increased immigration into Sabah. In a statement, YIS Secretary General Raden Kakung even emphasised investigations into the serious allegations referring to the secret projects to be a solemn duty of Sabah police squads.

Finally a group of at least twenty local nongovernmental organisations and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) are determined to shed light on the secret Project Mahathir. They openly accuse top-level government officials to be directly involved in the affair and demand an investigation by the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI). The NGOs are backed by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) politicians and numerous indignant citizens who are not only concerned about the large number of foreigners in the state but about the fact that governmental authorities seem to be involved in the secret projects. A petition – seeking 200,000 signatures – is aimed to urge the federal government to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the matter. The RCI is seen as the only possibility to investigate the reason behind the issuance of ICs based on false statutory declarations and to clarify the former prime minister's role in Project Mahathir. As Sabah seems already to be considered as gateway to Malaysia, activists want the authorities to check the validity of all Identity Cards issued in Sabah – regardless in which state the holder of the Sabahan IC may live and work today. The major signature drive is underway, and the organisers hope to hand the signatures over to the Yang



di-Pertuan Agong (the King of Malaysia) during the National Day celebrations in Sabah at the end of August.

### **Dr Mahathir's "New Bumiputeras"**

Analysing issues like ethnicity, citizenship and immigration in the multiethnic country of Malaysia contains difficulties. In contrast to the Chinese and Indian population in Malaysia, the Malays, the *orang asli* (the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia), and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak belong to the so-called Bumiputera community. Bumiputeras ("sons of the soil") enjoy a special position in society which is safeguarded by Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution. In response to 1969's racial riots between the native Malays and the growing Chinese population in Kuala Lumpur the government implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The NEP secures enormous privileges to all Bumiputeras. These "bumi privileges" were not only supposed to increase the Malay participation in terms of employment and share capital but to result in the development of a "Malay commercial and industrial community" (Trezzini 2001: 263).

There is a widespread perception that Project Mahathir is a serious menace to the native population of Sabah. The issuance of genuine ICs to illegal immigrants offers foreigners the opportunity to participate in Bumiputera privileges. Filipinos and Indonesians seem to be the "new bumiputeras" competing for entrance in universities or enterprises. These "extra people with Identity Cards" increasingly gain influence and threaten major non-Malay local ethnic groups such as the Kadazandusuns or Muruts who face the problem of being reduced to a minority in their own country.

If the Royal Commission of Inquiry investigated the case and found unequivocal evidence for governmental participation in Project Mahathir, the fact that all the immigrants were "invited" to stay in Malaysia offers several conclusions: Instead of having protected citizenship sufficiently, ICs were given to strangers, which leads to the conclusion that the Malaysian government prefers Muslim foreigners over non-Muslim native citizens of Borneo. There seems to be an hierarchy that puts Muslim Bumiputeras on top of society. Presumably the central government would have never supported a similar influx of Chinese immigrants – the increasing number of Muslims in the Northern Borneo state probably represents the major interest of those responsible for Sabah's demographic change.

Bumiputera, during Harris Salleh's term of office in Sabah also referred to as "Pribumi", can be considered as code for Muslims. When it comes to census categories the terms Bumiputera or Pribumi creates chances to deny or minimize the influx of immigrants. Census manipulation by Bumiputera census categories such as "Malay", "Bajau", "Suluk" or "other Bumiputera" cloud the real number of Filipino Bajaus or Indonesian Bugis in the state (Sadiq 2005: 112). These census categories and the underestimation of illegal immigrants in the state indicate that governmental authorities indeed try to hush up their participation in Project Mahathir. The secret Project IC seems to be exposed but as long as the issue has not been investigated, rumours and theories will not be taken seriously – as the unsuccessful efforts of several PBS politicians revealed.

## Concluding Remarks

Project Mahathir has already been making the headlines for several years: Sabah-based NGOs have never been as self-assured and successful in pressuring the government to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry as in the past few weeks. The mentioned shift in opinion of YIS authorities confirms the assumption that their recent signature campaign will finally succeed. The consequences of an investigation by the RCI, however, remain vague: Will Filipinos who gained their ICs through fraudulent means be sent home? Will false ICs be revoked or at least removed from the election rolls? Since most of the foreigners were issued genuine ICs based on false statutory declarations, it would not be feasible to prove every single immigrant's identity. As Sabah's economy depends on foreign workers, the scenario of a collapsing economy will hinder the state from sending Filipinos back home.

Sabah's transformation into "an apparently compliant BN stronghold" (Brown 2004: 235) has probably been promoted and planned by Malaysian authorities: "Phantom voters" seem to have played a key role in Sabah politics during the last decade. Evidently, there is a necessity to investigate into the issue. Otherwise the situation in Sabah might easily come to a head – particularly with regard to the next general elections. The change of Sabah's ethnic make-up contains an ever-increasing potential for conflicts. Non-Muslim natives of Sabah perceive the massive influx of immigrants and the possible "reverse takeover" as a serious threat: It is not only the fear of losing influence in terms of electoral success, the state's infrastructural congestion is raising concern in addition. Reported

crowded schools seem to be the precursor of related problems in the near future. Therefore, a Royal Commission of Inquiry is urgently needed to find a scapegoat for foreigners' dominance, thus preventing conflicts in the multiethnic state.

As long as the background and extent of Project Mahathir remains unsolved, the indigenous groups of Sabah will fear being irreversibly outnumbered and marginalised. The RCI could be the first step to counteract the trend of increasing growth rates and finally stop the practice of issuing ICs to foreigners.

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